

Experiences with North Russian Convoys" (ADM 199/721)

From:- Commanding Officer, H.M.S. "ULSTER QUEEN"

Date:- 5th. June, 1942.

To:- The Flag Officer in Charge, Belfast.

6 JUN 1942 136

Subject:- Experiences with North Russian Convoys.

In accordance with verbal instructions received from The Flag Officer in Charge, Belfast, the following remarks are submitted.

NARRATIVE.

1. H.M.S. "ULSTER QUEEN" with "LEDBURY", submarine "STURGEON" and fleet tanker, having left Seidisfjord at dawn on the 28th. April, rendezvous with Convoy P.Q.15 North of Iceland the afternoon of 28th. April.

Convoy was formed in five columns, each of five ships, Senior Officer of escort M.S.6 in H.M.S. "BRAMBLE".

Although visibility was low this day, Convoy was sighted and reported by Fokker-Wolf aircraft P.M., when hardly clear of Iceland.

In spite of ^{my} representations, "ULSTER QUEEN" had been stationed as leader of Port Wing Column of Convoy, by C.S.10 at escort conference in Seidisfjord.

2. C.S.10 in H.M.S. "NIGERIA" joined Convoy 30th. April and took station between Nos. 3 and 4 columns, ordering "ULSTER QUEEN" to take station ahead of him, also between Nos. 3 and 4 columns. Weather cleared that night and about midnight enemy shadowing aircraft appeared. Convoy was shadowed by enemy aircraft all the 1st. May and that night the first attack, made by six Junker 88, arrived.

X | The approach of these aircraft was detected in plenty of time by "NIGERIA's" R.D.F. Type 281 and all ships were therefore in 1st. degree of readiness.

As soon as the formation was sighted they came under controlled 4" barrage from "ULSTER QUEEN" and "NIGERIA" and spasmodic fire from rest of escort.

Enemy aircraft immediately split up and thereafter manoeuvred separately and futilely around convoy, dropping a few bombs near the A/S trawler astern of convoy, but never, with one exception, closing to a bombing position on the convoy. The one exception attacked through cloud on Port bow of "ULSTER QUEEN", received the full benefit of all this Ship's close range weapons, some from "NIGERIA" and machine gun fire from another of escort, and was shot down two cables from "ULSTER QUEEN"

3. In this, and all subsequent air attacks experienced, climatic conditions were identical, namely, solid cloud ceiling at 600 to 1,000 feet with extreme visibility on sea level.

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4. On 2nd. May, "NIGERIA" having reached 12 degrees East parted company, leaving instructions that "ULSTER QUEEN" was to remain stationed between Nos. 3 and 4 columns.

"ULSTER QUEEN" took over constant R.D.F. watch on her Type 279. Convoy rigorously shadowed all day by a Blom and Voss and a Dornier 18. Finding they were fired at whenever within 16,000 yards of "ULSTER QUEEN", the shadowers kept away at 9 or 10 miles distance.

Because, the night before, the escort had had ample warning (from "NIGERIA") of the approach of enemy aircraft, it is understood that similar ample warning was expected by them from "ULSTER QUEEN".

As explained in my letter of 31st. May, "ULSTER QUEEN's" Type 279 warning set completely failed to give any warning of aircraft approach at any time in the Arctic Seas.

Consequently, at any rate some destroyers of the escort were in the 3rd. degree of readiness when enemy torpedo aircraft attack developed just before midnight.

The Torpedo Aircraft were first sighted by "ULSTER QUEEN" distant about 6 miles on Starboard bow of convoy, coming in very low (at 20 to 30 feet above Sea). "ULSTER QUEEN" blew long Fog-horn blast hoisted signal for "Air attack imminent" and commenced 4" barrage.

Owing to "ULSTER QUEEN's" station between the columns this 4" barrage could not be fired low enough, and, in fact, had to be checked almost at once as the field of fire was so badly masked by two Merchant Ships that the approaching aircraft could not at times be seen above the line of the upper works of the intervening Merchant Ships.

The two Destroyers, "SOMALI" and "MATCHLESS", nearest to the line of approach of the enemy aircraft, (probably because an enemy submarine had attacked from the same quarter at the same time) were not observed to fire a shot at the enemy.

Consequently the Torpedo Aircraft formation was quite unbroken when it arrived at its release position, which appeared to be inside the A/S screen.

As soon, however, as torpedoes had been dropped, the aircraft zoomed up clear of the Ships masking our fire. One aircraft immediately hit by "ULSTER QUEEN's" fire, passed a cable ahead of this Ship, burning in the nose and crashed in flames one cable on the Port bow. Another, which turned away to pass down Starboard side of convoy was also badly hit and last seen emitting much smoke and dropping; but was not actually seen to crash.

The enemy Torpedo Aircraft were Heinkel III, and only three were seen by "ULSTER QUEEN", but three others were positively seen by other Ships with a better view.

Three Ships of Convoy were hit and sunk. "ULSTER QUEEN" had no difficulty in avoiding, by swinging slightly, one torpedo that just would not have cleared the ship ahead.

Torpedo tracks were clearly visible when nearly end on.

5. Earlier on the 2nd. May the Polish Submarine P.551, which had apparently strayed 150 miles from her patrol area and come on to the Convoy route, was attacked and sunk by "ST ALBANS" and another destroyer.

6. All day 3rd. May Convoy was still being shadowed. About 2230 (G.M.T.) that night a formation of four Junkers 88 and two Reconnaissance Aircraft were sighted by "ULSTER QUEEN" low down about seven miles distant on Starboard Quarter of Convoy.

This Ship made usual alarm signals and opened 4" controlled fire. "BADSWORTH" also seem to open fire about same time.

The aircraft formation immediately split up and endeavoured to approach from different sectors, some of them using cloud cover.

The gunnery unit of Type 279 R.D.F. here proved useful and with both this Ship's Directors controlling independently, the enemy aircraft showed no inclination to come within bombing range, in the face of combined 4" fire of "ULSTER QUEEN" and "BADSWORTH". Two bombs only were dropped near the A/S trawler astern of Convoy.

A Junker 88, hit by 4" barrage from "ULSTER QUEEN's" foremost group, was seen to crash by three ships in Convoy and by some of the escorts.

7. For remaining days of P.Q. 15 Voyage, snow storms, ice-floes and finally a half-gale prevented further attacks.

8. At Kola inlet, "ULSTER QUEEN" was anchored among the shipping off Murmansk, off the Rosta Naval Yard, to provide A/A protection.

During the fifteen days the Ship remained here, enemy low level bombing and dive bombing attacks were made on the Shipping on every fine, clear weather day, namely on approximately 50% of the days. The favourite hours for attack were 1000 and 1530.

All attacks followed the same course. A formation of up to twelve JU.88 with fighter escort would cross over the inlet at about 15,000 feet, wide of the known A/A batteries, then arrive over the shipping from low over the hills on the East, in unbroken formation, and bomb while heading for home.

Russian A/A batteries and "ULSTER QUEEN" would open fire and usually succeeded in spoiling the bombing aim. Then, after the formations had been scattered by gun fire, the Russian fighter aircraft would appear.

In the course of these attacks, two JU.88 were shot down by the combined gun fire, but on the 18th. May, one of the two occasions on which a deliberate attack was made on "ULSTER QUEEN" by aircraft detached from the main body, one JU.88, engaged by "ULSTER QUEEN" alone, was shot down by 4" fire.

In the course of all these attacks, only two Merchant Ships were hit during the time spent at Murmansk and neither of these ships were covered by "ULSTER QUEEN"

9. During the stay at Murmansk a pulling Regatta, spread over several days, was organised in "ULSTER QUEEN", to divert the minds of the Ship's Company from Air to Muscle.
10. The Return Voyage, with Convoy Q.P.12, was surprisingly uneventful.

The Convoy was only shadowed for a short time on 25th. May, when "EMPIRE MORN's" Hurricane was sent up and shot down the offending Fokker Wolf 200, as is reported elsewhere.

THE MENACE AND THE MEANS.

11. The degree of enemy menace to North Russian Convoys in order of importance is:-

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1. Attack by enemy Cruisers or Pocket Battleship.
2. Air Attack.
3. Destroyer Attack.
4. Submarine Attack.

With these the enemy has supreme reconnaissance facilities, supported by A.S.V. and R.D.F.

We have no Air Cover for approximately 1,000 "Vulnerable" miles, except for doubtful Russian protection for the last 60 miles.

We have no Cruiser escort, as a rule, East of 12 degrees East.

12. The Submarine danger is placed last because the continuous daylight of the Northern Summer, coupled with the strong A/S escort usually provided for the Convoy, react very unfavourably to the Submarine. The Submarine menace hardly concerns and only remotely interests the A/A Ship in the Russian Convoy.

13. The prevailing climatic conditions during the Northern Summer, on the other hand, greatly favours the Air menace.

Of all forms of Air Attack the Torpedo-Aircraft attack is the most deadly.

Almost as deadly is the very low-flying bomb attack, termed "English Attack" by the German airmen, well known in the Southern Irish Sea and on the East Coast of England, but not as yet introduced in the Arctic.

Nothing that has happened has caused me to modify in the least my opinions regarding Air Defence of a Convoy, culled from experience gained in the Southern Irish Sea when it was more active.

These opinions are:-

- (a) However crammed with short-range A/A weapons the ships of the convoy or escort may be, the success or failure of any form of Air Attack depends, in the first place, on controlled fire from long-range weapons.
- (b) The correct stationing of the A/A Ship is outside, but close to, the wing column of the Convoy on the side on which attack is expected. Preferably the A/A Ship should have sufficient flexibility of speed to vary frequently her position from ahead to astern on that side. In this position the A/A Ship has scope to use her long-range weapons effectively through 180 degrees, and anything that gets past and over the Convoy can be tackled by her close-range weapons.

I am convinced that had not German reconnaissance aircraft on May 2nd. noted, for fourteen hours, the A/A Ship of P.Q. 15 boxed up in the middle of the Convoy (against my wish), the Torpedo Aircraft that night would not have attacked in a bunch, all on the one bearing most favourable to themselves and least favourable to us.

- (c) Since synchronised attacks from different bearings are to be expected, it follows that two A/A Ships, on opposite sides working in echelon, are required for the adequate A/A protection of any convoy.

14. For any form of surface vessel attack it should be recognised that the A/A Ship, provided she is not occupied with aircraft, can and should provide heavy-effective covering fire for our Destroyers' counter attack, while at the same time laying smoke-floats to screen the Convoy.

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COMMAND.

15. Because each North Russian Convoy is a Home Fleet Operation, it seems that the Command of the escort must always be vested in a Home Fleet Officer. Yet, it is very possible that in many cases the Senior Officer of the Western Approaches component of the escort is more experienced in convoy protection and can better appreciate the limitations of Merchant Ships in Convoy.
16. Rightly or wrongly, from "ULSTER QUEEN's" association with convoys P.Q. 15 and Q.P. 12, I formed the impression that the Home Fleet regard the A/A Ship as a sort of Hermaphrodite, "not quite Man-o-War, not quite Merchant Ship", and, as such, barely entitled to have a knowledge of its subject.

At the escort conference for P.Q. 15, although I quite definitely proposed where the A/A Ship should be stationed, I found that the Senior Officer had already decided the stationing of the Ship.

I was not invited to the Escort Conference for Q.P. 12, but managed later at the Masters' Conference, to arrange amicably with the Senior Officer my Ship's stationing.

PERSONEL AND MATERIAL.

17. Temperatures of from 15 to 20 degrees of frost, with much snow, were encountered throughout much of Convoy P.Q. 15.

While the Convoy was being shadowed, it was necessary to keep the hands in 1st. Degree of Readiness for long periods during the likeliest times for attack - since no reliance could be placed on the R.D.F. warning set.

The Action Quarters most difficult to man in a hurry are the two Directors. Consequently the Control Officers and their crews, when not closed up on watch had to sleep and eat no further away than their respective transmitting stations.

The provision of snow shelters at certain exposed gun quarters is necessary.

The main system of warming the Ship, namely heated air pumped through the ventilating trunks, proved utterly futile.

18. In cold weather it was found most necessary to work all moving parts of all the Armament and Directors, and the locks of Pom Poms and .5" guns, every twenty minutes without fail. Otherwise they quickly stiffened and missed fire. The horrible state of affairs described in "Experiences of a Trawler" in Part II page 5 of Western Approaches News Bulletin of April, 1942, is unthinkable in an A/A Ship.
19. For all occasions of engaging aircraft it has been found essential that the Forward and After 4" Groups shall be controlled by their respective Directors, working quite independently of each other.
- The only occasion visualised on which all guns will be on one Director is when engaging surface vessels.

For the above reason, a "HUNT" Class Destroyer, fitted with only one Director is not an efficient substitute for an A/A Ship.

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MESSAGE

1803B/14 June

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FROM C.IN C. WESTERN APPROACHES

DATE: 14.6.42.

RECD: 1827

P/L BY T/P

ADDRESSED: C.in C. H.P., (R) Admiralty, A.C.I.C., F.O.I.C. Belfast

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644. My 1014B/14.

1914B/16th June

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From experience in this Command I consider that when two A.A. Vessels are included in convoy escort they should be stationed on opposite sides of the convoy close to wing columns and working in Echelon. It is not considered that they should be stationed inside the convoy.

It is most desirable that A.A. Ships C.O.'s should attend the convoy conference. Admiralty, A.C.I.C., F.O.I.C. Belfast.

625. Your 1803/14th. Convoy conference held at Hvalfjord followed by convoy escort conference at Svidis Fjord (Iceland). S.O. cruiser covering force presided over both. A/s ships attended latter. This procedure appears 1803B/14 to be satisfactory.

2. These convoys normally attacked by bombers and torpedo boats simultaneously, with U-boats present more often than not. Terms of attack appear to be directed on outlying ships

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20. As far as could be seen, after the "NIGERIA" had parted company, "ULSTER QUEEN" was the only Ship in escort or convoy with a complete, permanent system of A/A Look-outs.

Without, anywhere in the Convoy, an R.D.F. set that can give the required warning efficient A/A Look-outs are indispensable.

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B. A. McQuarrie
CAPTAIN,
ROYAL NAVY.

II.
The Secretary of the Admiralty,
(for D. G. D.)
The Captain,
H.M.S. "EXCELLENT",
Portsmouth.

(Copy to: The Commander-in-Chief, Western Approaches.)

Forwarded for information.

2. The original was forwarded to the Commander-in-Chief, Western Approaches, in my letter No. 1000/01/1227/2 of 10th June, 1942.

Belfast.
15th June, 1942.

W. H. M. J.
REAR ADMIRAL,
FLAG OFFICER IN CHARGE.

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